

Banana/Dump Truck (1994), cello solo and orchestra, commissioned by Arts at St. Anne's for Fred Sherry, Boosey & Hawkes 1994 (25')

Banana/Dump Truck program note

The title Banana/Dump Truck comes from a game I played as a child at night, in bunk beds, with my brother Gale. We would think of two words, phrases, or concepts that seem to have nothing in common, such as banana and dump truck. We would then try to get from one to the other by a process of association. For example: banana reminds him of monkey, monkey reminds me of the jungle, the jungle reminds him of the tropical rain forest, the tropical rain forest reminds me of a television show we saw about the destruction of the tropical rain forests. On that television show was a lot of heavy machinery, the quintessential heavy machinery is a dump truck . . . voilà! The fun, of course, is in the journey itself -- what crazy things we pass through. This game is a good description of the continuity of the composition Banana/Dump Truck: the cello sets forth a musical proposition which inspires the orchestra to a proposition of its own which seems like a plausible response; this in turn incites the cello. The responses are not always obvious continuations or developments. For example, the association of banana and monkey would probably qualify as universal, but the association of the tropical rain forests and the television show about the destruction of the tropical rain forest is very personal; maybe you did not see that show. Clearly the television show was brought up only because we wanted to get to dump truck, where as monkey comes "organically" out of banana. Now that I think of it, this game is also a reasonable paradigm for how long conversations twist and turn through an evening -- except it is more polite; the two parties allow each other to finish.

The cello and the orchestra never actually play together. However, four soloists from the cello section act as a ripieno and accompany the primary soloist. Credit is due to the baroque concerti grossi, particularly Bach's Brandenburgs (number five has always been a favorite of mine). There is also some of the drama of later concertos, as the soloist bears down for a cadenza, and as the orchestra comes barreling out of the cadenza. In fact, since the soloist never plays with the orchestra, most of the piece has the tone of setting up cadenza, cadenza, and tutti response to cadenza. Another source of inspiration for Banana/Dump Truck (particularly at the end) is the old time jazz practice of "trading fours," where two soloists, or the soloist and the band, or even two tap dancers try to show up one another in a volley of "hot licks."

There is also a touch of vaudeville.

-- Steven Mackey